

INCIDENTAL TRAPPING OF AMERICAN KESTRELS IN BLACKBIRD DECOY TRAPS

by

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Introduction

Since 1962 several versions of the decoy trap have been designed and tested to enable farmers and researchers to trap large numbers of pest birds, such as the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and various blackbird species (see review by Meanley 1971). According to Ballard (1964), Stiles (1966), and Meanley (1971), the decoy trap is highly selective, taking few nontarget species. No mention is made of any incidental trapping of raptors in decoy traps of any design, but recent observations by the junior author indicate that such trapping may occur more frequently than previously reported, at least with the American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*).

Observations and Discussion

Between 16 August 1978 and 1 September 1979, four decoy traps virtually identical to the "New York Starling Trap" (U.S. Dept. of Interior, unpubl. report 1962) were set by three farmers near farm buildings in 2 x 2.5 km of farmland habitat in southwestern Quebec to trap blackbirds foraging nearby. During this period, nine American Kestrels, sexes not recorded, were trapped incidentally in these traps. On another occasion, one kestrel was observed perched on a branch next to a decoy trap feeding on a Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) caught between the two layers of cage netting. It is not known whether some were repeat captures, as only one kestrel was banded. Trap-shyness may not be significant, as apparently kestrels can be retrapped with Bal-chatri traps (Berger and Mueller 1959) in the same area in the same season (E. Henckel, pers. comm.). It is also not known if this phenomenon is widespread, although a kestrel was trapped and released unharmed in July 1979 from a decoy trap set 40 km away from the others.

At least three kestrels had badly cut ceres. Seven kestrels were known to be released, but at least one bird was killed by the trap operator. On at least three occasions, some or all of the decoy blackbirds, usually five to a trap, were killed and partially eaten by the kestrels. This problem is not limited entirely to kestrels, as a female Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) was caught and released unharmed from a decoy trap in this area in May 1980. All five decoy birds were dead, and some were eaten.

It is doubtful if decoy traps are a significant source of mortality for kestrels, but this apparent willingness to enter decoy traps to feed upon the occupants and indirectly scaring away potential victims constitutes a distinct disadvantage of using decoy traps to capture pest blackbirds. It is difficult to estimate the extent of use of these traps in North America, but at least three farmers experiencing crop losses to blackbirds in the Beauharnois district of Quebec are using them.

This foraging behavior of kestrels is indicative of their opportunistic nature. Earlier, Hodgdon (1975) reported a male kestrel decapitating a Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*) through the wire mesh of the trap holding the finch.

The decoy trap or perhaps a smaller, more manageable version could prove useful for trapping small raptors either on breeding territory or at hawk-trapping stations during migration. These traps would not require constant vigilance. However, frequent checking of the trap contents should lessen constant bait replacement and/or damage to cerea or feathers of the raptors.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

1981 RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION CONFERENCE AND INTERNATIONAL BALD EAGLE/OSPREY SYMPOSIUM

At the Sheraton Mt.-Royal Hotel in Montreal, an international symposium on the biology and management of the Bald Eagle and Osprey will be held on October 28 and 29, 1981, followed immediately by the annual meeting and conference of the Raptor Research Foundation, Inc. from October 30 to November 2. The scientific program will be accompanied by workshops, evening films and an exhibit of both recent and rare paintings of birds of prey. For further information, contact:

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